

Condoms Found to Cut Risk of Women Getting HPV

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In a groundbreaking study that could influence the sex education debate, researchers have found that consistent and proper use of condoms significantly reduces the risk of contracting a virus that can cause cervical cancer.

University of Washington researchers report today that female college students whose partners always wore condoms were 70% less likely to become infected with human papilloma virus, or HPV, than students whose partners used condoms less than 5% of the time.

Condoms have long been touted as a barrier against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. But advocates of sexual abstinence programs have argued condoms are ineffective against HPV, which can be transmitted through skin-to-skin contact even if a condom is worn.

The Food and Drug Administration has been considering whether to revise the labeling of condoms after some conservatives in Congress demanded that manufacturers' claims about disease prevention be evaluated for "medical accuracy."

The new study brings solid data to the debate, experts said.

"Those who are opposed to condoms claim condoms are not very effective, particularly against HPV," said James Trussell, director of the Office of Population Research at Princeton University. "Here we have an actual study, rather than just an assertion. Condom use prevented HPV infection 70% of the time. That's pretty good."

But abstinence advocates said the study also showed that some women whose partners used condoms did become infected. Under the Bush administration, schools and other groups that accept federal funding are required to promote abstinence until marriage.

"I think it has no bearing on whether abstinence is the best thing to teach kids," said Peter LaBarbera of the Illinois Family Institute. "Clearly, abstinence until marriage is a healthy message ... and this study shows that even partners who always use condoms show it is not a cure-all for HPV."

The virus is the most common sexually transmitted disease. About 20 million

people in the U.S. have HPV and at least half of sexually active men and women will experience an infection in their lifetime, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Although most cases of HPV produce no symptoms and clear up on their own, the virus can cause genital warts and lesions that lead to cervical and other reproductive cancers.

The new study, to be published today in the New England Journal of Medicine, followed 82 female college students for several years.